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ABSTRACT

As part of a series of booklets designed to support parents and carers of young children in the home, this issue explores the challenges that all young children face in learning to manage their feelings and emotions so they can be safe, optimistic, and enthusiastic about life and learning. Following an introductory section emphasizing the early years as the foundation for all later growth, development, and learning and identifying important characteristics of infants' and young children's parents and carers, the booklet is organized in five sections. Section 1 identifies learning about feelings as one of the most important challenges for young children and states that young children need the support of an adult with whom they feel safe in order to learn about feelings. Sections 2 through 4 provide the following types of information about infants, toddlers, and preschool children, respectively: (1) developmental expectations; (2) the child's needs in the relationship with the parent/carer; (3) places to be and things to do, focusing on children's needs for particular types of experiences or play; and (4) learning and doing, providing suggestions for play with adults, and addressing special concerns relevant to the age group, such as separation, jealousy, tantrums, relating to other children, or out-of-bounds behavior. Section 5 suggests titles for further reading and lists books to read with children. (KB)



Learning at home series

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Number 1 2003

Learning about feelings

By Pam Linke, Child and Youth Health



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About the Learning at Home Series

The *Learning at Home Series* has been developed to support parents and carers of young children in their most important task—starting young children on the pathway of a lifetime of living and learning.

The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.

- Early experiences set the pattern for all later learning.
- Early experiences and relationships affect how children feel about themselves, how they get on with other people and how they join in and enjoy life.
- Every experience has an impact. Babies and young children are learning all the time, regardless of whether we think we are 'teaching' them.

Research has shown that a strong foundation in these years starts children on the pathway to:

- being able to relate confidently and effectively with others;
- mental and emotional health; and
- making the most of each child's abilities in education.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

This research also shows us what kinds of experiences and relationships babies and young children need to get the best start for living and learning.



What matters is how they are learning and what they are learning. Learning takes place in relationships. If the earliest relationships are warm and loving, babies and young children have the best chance to make the most of the opportunities in their worlds.

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- are warm and caring;
- know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them;
- take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed; and
- are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

Living is learning and children learn through living. These books are a guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at the different stages of early childhood. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests.

Adults watch and listen and provide opportunities and support to build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences.

Adults provide responsive and sensitive care, a safe and interesting place to be and follow children's lead in providing things they like to do ... children do the learning.

Learning about feelings
Learning at Home Series, No.1, 2003

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Pam Linke is the Parenting Manager for Child and Youth Health in South Australia. Child and Youth Health is developing a state-wide program to support parents using books and their website www.cyh.com. Pam has written a number of books for parents including *Parenting at home and away*, *Let's stop bullying* and *Pants aren't rude* (children's sexual development).

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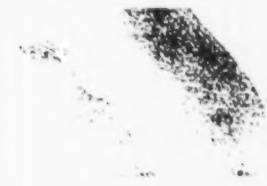
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About AECA

The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services. AECA is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature.

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Learning about feelings

Perhaps the most important challenge for children in the early years is learning how to manage feelings. Feelings or emotions affect children's lives in everything they do. The child who feels loved and lovable (not the same thing), and who feels safe and able to try to do things, has a head start in learning in every other area.

When children feel safe, optimistic and enthusiastic they learn well. If they are afraid, stressed or uncomfortable they are thinking about these things rather than about all the exciting learning opportunities in the world around them.

Babies and very young children have strong feelings which they show through their actions such as crying and laughing, and sometimes through words. It is natural for them to show their feelings immediately and strongly. It takes a very long time for children to learn to understand and control the way they show or express their feelings. This learning, however, starts from when they are babies.

Feelings: What young children need to learn

Babies and young children need to learn that feelings can be managed. They learn over time that they can manage and express their own feelings in ways that will help them feel okay with themselves and be able to live, play and work successfully with other people.

Babies and young children can be overwhelmed by the power of their feelings. We see (or feel) this for

ourselves in the desperate cry of a young baby when a feed is late or the distress of a toddler in the midst of a temper tantrum. Being overpowered by feelings in this way is very frightening for babies and young children. They may fear being abandoned altogether (they haven't yet learned that their caring adults always do come back). They may feel that there will be some kind of immense punishment in relationship to the strength of their own feelings. (Infants and very young children haven't yet learned the difference between their own feelings and what the adult feels, and they believe that others feel the same way they do.)

Feelings: Good ways of learning

In order to learn about feelings, young children need the support of an adult with whom they feel safe and who they know will help and comfort them when they need it. Babies and young children are best helped to learn about feelings by:

- making sure that they are not in situations that they are unable to manage;
- responding to the child's behaviour as an expression of feeling;
- showing children that strong feelings can be managed, and that they will neither drive the other person away nor bring about scary punishment; and
- staying with children who are experiencing strong feelings and helping them to learn to manage the feelings (in ways suited to their age and temperament).



Babies

Learning about feelings: Babies

Babies learn from everything that happens in their day. Feeding, nappy change, holding, being talked to and play. Most of all they learn from being with adults who enjoy caring for and playing with them.

Adults protect babies from fear and frustration by being sensitive to their needs and responding promptly to their cries and getting to know how each baby communicates their feelings and needs.

Development: What to expect

All of the world is new and strange for babies. In the first few months they do not understand that anyone else exists to care for them unless there is someone with them. Once you are out of sight you are out of the baby's mind. This is why babies can get terrified so quickly if they are hungry, afraid or in pain and there is no immediate response to their cries. Over the first few months they learn that the world is predictable and safe because someone comes when they cry and most times guesses to what they need, or at least can offer comfort. They start to learn who their safe people are and, in the second half of the first year, they become very attached to a few special people. They rely on these people to be there and keep them feeling safe as they start crawling and exploring their world. They are likely to become frightened if they can't find their special person or people and also to be

frightened of people they don't know. Babies who used to be happy with anyone may now hide and cling when a stranger appears. Babies who went to bed happily may now find bedtime separation frightening because they know they need their special safe people but they don't understand that they are still there caring, even though out of sight. Their biggest fear at this age is of being abandoned—we know that we will not abandon them, but they don't. What they enjoy most is being with and having gentle fun with parents and carers.

What babies enjoy most is being with and having fun with parents and carers.

Relationships: Baby and you

In order to develop the trust that children need to grow and learn well, babies need to feel safe and loved and to be treated as real people with feelings and needs and wants just like anyone else. Sometimes people say that what babies feel does not matter so much because they won't understand or remember—but what happens to babies is very important because it is the building block for future development.

Places to be and things to do

Babies need a safe and familiar environment where they can get to know the place where they live and belong. Around the home and neighbourhood are good places for babies and toddlers to do their first learning. If they are in a different place, taking some of their special things from home can help—things like a rug, an article of mother's clothing that smells like her, a dummy if the baby has one, and so on.

At home and away they may need:

- soft toys to cuddle for comfort;
- toys which they can use to make things happen (e.g. make a noise);
- safe space to practice independence—try crawling around the floor to get a babies' eye view; and
- toys to practice independence—walking, climbing, push-along toys.



Babies

Feeling safe

Young babies need their carers to be very responsive to the baby's signals—the way they tell you how they are feeling and what they need. You help the baby to learn that this new world is a safe place to be in, and how to make sense of all the newness by responding in the same way each time, and preparing the baby for whatever change is to happen (e.g. a nappy change or being picked up). Young babies learn this more quickly if they are not cared for by too many different people (each with a different way of holding, speaking and caring).

Feeling loved

As you respond to their cries in ways that bring comfort, babies gradually learn that there is someone to come and care for them and they learn to wait a short while (mostly) when they are hungry or wanting to be held. Adults help by being aware of the baby's level of anxiety and always responding while the baby can still cope. For quiet babies you need to be able to notice other signs of stress (as well as crying) such as being unsettled, throwing their arms back, looking tense and so on.

Feeling confident

As babies learn to be attached to particular people, they use these people as a safe base for exploring the world. They venture out with their special person's encouragement and then return for comfort (touch base) before venturing out again

(a bit like a teenager first leaving home). If you are mostly available for the baby when needed, as well as encouraging the baby's need to explore and move away, the baby gradually gains confidence. If the baby can be in control of this coming and going process the feelings of inner security develop more strongly. If babies sense that the adults want to push them away more quickly than they are ready for, it makes them more anxious and less ready to try. Babies who cannot reliably get comfort from an adult might stop trying, at a cost to their emotional security and learning.

Meeting new people

If babies are to be cared for by different people it helps to give them time to get to feel safe with the new person while still in the care of the adult they know well. If their special adult shows that the new person is OK, and lets the relationship develop in the baby's time, it helps the baby to feel secure with the new situation. It is very important to let the baby know when you are leaving and to spend some time focused on the baby when you return.

Learning and doing

A baby's first experiences about feelings should be from being held and cuddled and having pleasurable times with caring adults. An important part of feeling valued is the way you learn to know and respond appropriately to the baby's cues or messages—by how they smile when they want you



Babies

to play with them or be with them, or how they look away or look tense when they need a break. Different babies show their feelings in different ways. Each baby is an individual and each baby has likes and dislikes in the ways that they are cared for and played with. When you get to know babies as individuals it helps them to feel that they matter and to start along the path to the adults that they will become.

Things you can do:

- Talking and singing to babies.
- Imitating their vocalisations (little noises) and movements.
- Calling them by name.
- Telling babies what you are doing so they gradually learn to recognise the words with the activities.
- Helping them to learn to deal with separations, however short, from their special people by playing games that involve coming and going and providing comfort when they need it.

Games should be fun for the baby and only used when the baby is enjoying them.

Some games for babies to help with separations

- The most common game is peep-bo and there are many variations on this that show that people who disappear come back again.
- Games that involve taking turns help infants to develop a sense of self, and of being an active partner in what is happening are ideal.

Sometimes babies' feelings can be overwhelming and they cry in great distress. Secure and gentle holding and rocking help to bring back a sense of security.





Toddlers

Learning about feelings: Toddlers

The world of the toddler is opening up, bringing new opportunities and successes and also new challenges, fears and frustrations. Toddlers are learning who they are and wanting to be independent—it is a 'me do' time. A big challenge for the toddler is learning to be with other children, and for this toddlers need lots of adult support.

Development: What to expect

Now that they can move around, toddlers want to explore the wider world as well as needing the security of a safe person to support their explorations and to help them learn to manage their feelings. Toddlers have a very strong drive to be independent which is important to their development. At the same time they find many of the things they want to do on their own very difficult and they can easily get frustrated. Many other things they want to do on their own are prevented by adults because they are unsafe in some way. The frustration of all this easily flows over into temper tantrums.

Toddlers cannot yet separate their own feelings from those of others. If they feel angry they may believe that you are angry too and this can be very scary.

They still have not learned how to distinguish themselves from others, so they are usually not ready to be able to share, take turns with other children or see the other child's point of view. This makes it really hard if they are with other children a lot unless there is an adult always nearby to help.

Toddlers are still anxious about separation from their main carers—at bedtimes as well as during daytime separations. They may have many other fears due to their unclear understanding of how the world works (e.g. fear of going down the bath plug hole or toilet, fear of people who look different, fear of monsters and witches, and worries about losing parts of their bodies).

Relationships: Toddler and you

Children often show their feelings through behaviour. Whenever you respond to children's behaviour it is also important to respond to the feelings behind the behaviour. This helps children to be understood, to start to understand and manage their own feelings, and to begin to express their feelings appropriately rather than act on impulse.

Toddlers need you to:

- encourage them in their explorations and skill development by following their lead;
- be there to hold and comfort them when things get too hard as they work towards the balance between independence and dependence;

Places to be and things to do

Toddlers are learning about the real world they live in and they do best in places that they know well and where safety precautions for their explorations are in practice (e.g. good fences and gates, locks on cupboards with poisons, no unfenced water etc.).

They need opportunities to play about feelings. This can be done with:

- doll families;
- puppets;
- sand and water;
- drums and musical toys;
- dress ups;
- paints; and
- mud

The toddlers should be free to play as they want to with these materials, which offer opportunities to express feelings. They often need and want you to play with them but they also need you not to direct the play but to follow their lead (unless it is unsafe of course).

A place to be which is interesting, but safe and predictable supports toddlers best. They do well helping you around the home and garden, together with short local trips to shops, parks, to post a letter or watch a train go by or even a walk around the block.

- be able to keep them safe from their own feelings as well as the dangers of the world, for example, not to let them hurt themselves or others;
- be on their side as they try out their independence and not to get into battles with them as they struggle to become their own person;
- show that strong feelings can be managed—that when their feelings are out of control, yours are not and you will neither hurt them nor leave them;
- label feelings for them at the same time as they are learning to manage the expression of the feelings (e.g. 'It really made you angry when someone took your toy, I won't let you hit and I won't let anyone hit you');
- distract them or make a game of difficult situations—this helps avoid unnecessary arguments and helps them to learn to manage frustration; and
- hold and comfort them when they are sad or anxious—talking about their feelings helps them to feel more confident and to move back into play in their own time.

It is your support that helps children to begin to learn how to express their feelings and understand other children's or people's feelings and needs. However this is a continuing process and takes years to fully achieve.

Toddlers

Spending time close to a caring adult is very helpful for toddlers who are having trouble managing their feelings with other children.

Learning and doing

Toddlers need adult supervision when playing near other children. Adults are still their most important playmates.

- Home experiences such as helping hang out washing and digging in the garden help toddlers to practice for growing up and to express their feelings about what grown-ups do.
- Very simple stories about feelings help them to manage these better (for example, about being away from home, going to bed, or getting into trouble).
- One of the ways toddlers learn to manage their worries is by insisting on doing things the same way each time and this helps them to feel secure to take the next steps in their development.
- Toddlers may need routines in the way you do things with them (e.g. the way you put them to bed with the same song and story).
- Anxieties can also be helped by little rituals — special ways of doing things (e.g. the special way you wave goodbye, all the special little interactions between adult and toddler).

- Playing with or near others needs to be closely supervised and children given help and support when they need it.
- Talk to toddlers about their feelings and help them to know how others feel (e.g. 'You are enjoying playing with that. Kim feels sad when he can't have a turn').
- Having a comfort toy or dummy can help children to manage separations from family.





Toddlers

Tantrums

Tantrums happen when toddlers' feelings 'boil over'. They need to know that you will not give in to unreasonable demands, leave them or hurt or frighten them. Tantrums are common in the toddler years, but it is worth thinking about when they are most likely to occur, in case there are ways to prevent tension building up.

Suggestions to avoid tantrums:

- have the evening meal a bit earlier;
- spend some time with a tired toddler;
- have a soothing bath; or
- shorten a shopping trip.

Separation

If toddlers are having trouble managing separation it helps if their family member or carer can stay with them while they get to know the new carer. If a parent has to leave before the toddler is ready it needs to be predictable for the toddler (e.g. Mummy has to go after a turn on the swing). Then the new carer should be available for comfort as long as the child needs it.

Jealousy

One of the most difficult times for toddlers is the arrival of a new baby in the family. Jealousy is natural as the toddlers feel their own special place in the family has been lost. Punishment for showing these feelings makes things worse. Of course, prevent toddlers from hurting the baby or any other 'naughty' behaviour, but at the same time let them know that you understand how they feel. Making special time for toddlers every day will help to reassure them.





Preschool

Learning about feelings: Preschool and early school

Development: What to expect

By the time children are about four years old they have made great strides in learning about themselves and their world. Most children will feel confident enough to leave their main carers for short or longer periods of time and many will be going to preschool. Children have learned that their bodies and minds are separate and that adults can't read their minds. They will usually be secure enough to play together with other children, to take turns, to wait for a turn and to share (at least some of the time). When they are stressed they are likely to lose these new skills for a time. They may have short 'friendships' with other children based on similar likes. They often seem over confident as they can get very excited and feelings sometimes get out-of-bounds.

The first year of school puts a lot of pressure on most children, who can become anxious all over again as they move from the world of adults into the world of children. They also have to learn to cope with lots of new expectations in terms of learning new skills and may easily lose confidence when comparing themselves with others. They may be overwhelmed by the world of school and its many demands, as well as the challenges of recess and lunch times in the big school yard and possible

bullying. They are usually able to talk about feelings and experiences and this helps them to learn to manage them better.

Relationships: Children and you

Parents and children's main carers are still their best supporters and teachers about feelings.

Adults can help children by:

- helping them to talk about feelings, by giving them time and showing you want to listen. Help them to say how they feel, before you have your say;
- helping them to join with others and respond to the behaviour of others, for example 'can you tell Joe that you don't like it when he pushes you?'—you need to be there to be sure that this works and to show that you understand both children's feelings. It may be necessary also to say to Joe 'I know you feel disappointed when the others don't let you play but it's not OK to push—let's think of what you can do'. Sometimes the child will have a suggestion to try, sometimes you will need to help think of one. This is an important time of learning to manage relationships;
- being available to listen to children when they first get home—allowing children to talk about what they want to without asking too many questions will help them to relax;
- helping them to deal with problems—sometimes listening and helping the child to think of

Places to be and things to do

Children need:

- their own special places to relax and be themselves;
- space to run and enjoy active play;
- games to play together with friends—balls, bikes, building toys, dress-ups;
- painting and drawing equipment.



solutions is enough, and sometimes adult intervention is needed, especially if there is bullying. If children tell you they are having problems with managing school it is important to talk to the teacher about what is happening; and

- allowing children 'free' time at home to relax and be themselves helps with coping with the demands of the school or preschool day.

Children who are struggling with lots of new learning at school also need time to do the things they love to do and do well, even if it seems like going backwards sometimes. For example, children who are just learning to read books still need to be read to for a long time. Stories about children like themselves are often comforting and helpful.

Learning and doing

School pressures

Children of this age will be experiencing preschool and then school, and will probably be tired by the time they return to child care or home and will need time and space to 'wind down'. Especially in the early years of school some unpressured time is important, as the school day can be very stressful at first. Providing something nourishing to eat before they are too tired (e.g. when they first get home) can give a new lease of life. So does some outdoors space or indoors space when they can do a relaxing activity that they enjoy.

Preschool

Children starting school are often finding things that are very hard for them to achieve, so make sure they have lots of opportunities to do the things they do well because this builds confidence.

Relating to other children

Children usually enjoy playing with other children and having another child over to play occasionally assists this. It is a time when you can teach them the social skills they need by showing them what to do and by talking to them about what they can do in situations if they are having difficulty. Listening to their worries without showing that you are worried yourself will usually help them to feel better. Bedtime is often a good listening time and helps children to understand that you are ready to listen. Helping them to find their own solutions if you can brings added confidence.

Out-of-bounds behaviour

Over exuberance can be channelled by some active play that isn't too stimulating. Some children respond best to a less active game such as building something or painting.

Children can express feelings by painting, dramatic play, drawing and by stories about children in similar situations.

When to get help

If children regress in their behaviour (go back to being more babyish) for more than a short period of time, are unable to play freely, are continually aggressive or unable to relate to caring adults, consider getting some support from a health professional.



Reading

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Further reading

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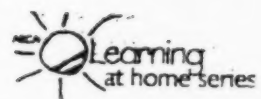
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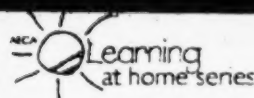
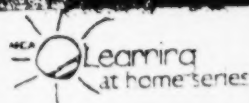
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 AECA ... voice for young children

The *Learning at Home Series* has been especially developed for parents, family day care carers, grandparents and others who care for children in the home. Each issue is about a different aspect of young children's growth and learning. This issue explores the challenges that all children face in learning to manage their feelings and emotions so they can be safe, optimistic and enthusiastic about life and learning.

Learning about feelings is written by best-selling AECA author Pam Linke.

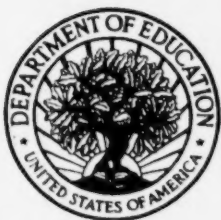


AECA ... voice for young children



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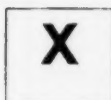


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